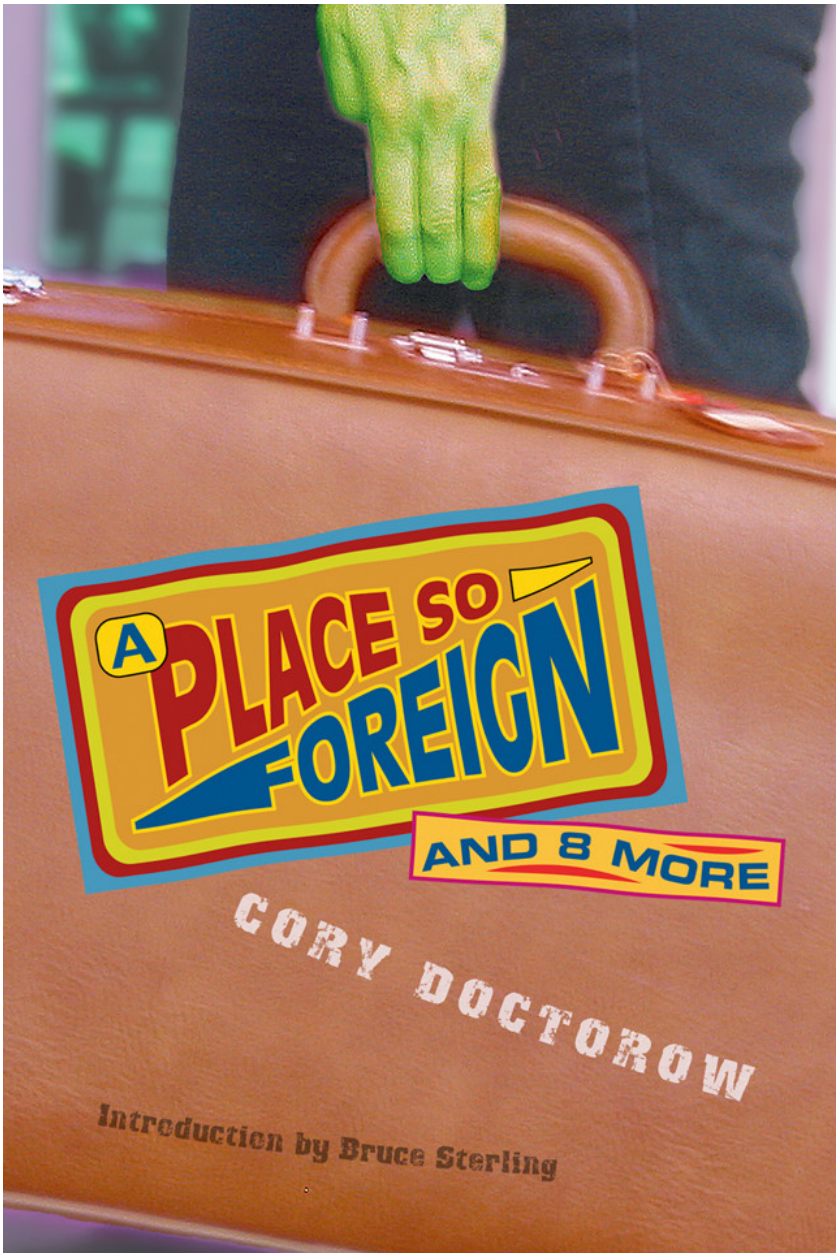
A PLACE SO FOREIGN
AND 8 MORE
CORY DOCTOROW
Introduction by Bruce Sterling

A Place so Foreign

Cory Doctorow

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About Doctorow:

Cory Doctorow (born July 17, 1971) is a blogger, journalist and science fiction author who serves as co-editor of the blog Boing Boing. He is in favor of liberalizing copyright laws, and a proponent of the Creative Commons organisation, and uses some of their licenses for his books. Some common themes of his work include digital rights management, file sharing, Disney, and post-scarcity economics. Source: Wikipedia

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A Place so Foreign

My Pa disappeared somewhere in the wilds of 1975, when I was just fourteen years old. He was the Ambassador to 1975, but back home in 1898, in New Jerusalem, Utah, they all thought he was Ambassador to France. When he disappeared, Mama and I came back through the triple-bolted door that led from our apt in 1975 to our horsebarn in 1898. We returned to the dusty streets of New Jerusalem, and I had to keep on reminding myself that I was supposed to have been in France, and "polly-voo" for my chums, and tell whoppers about the Eiffel Tower and the fancy bread and the snails and frogs we'd eaten.

I was born in New Jerusalem, and raised there till I was ten. Then, one summer's day, my Pa sat me on his knee and told me we'd be going away for a while, that he had a new job.

"But what about the store?" I said, scandalised. My Pa's wonderful store, the only General Store in town not run by the Saints, was my second home. I'd spent my whole life crawling and then walking on the dusty wooden floors, checking stock and unpacking crates with waybills from exotic places like Salt Lake City and even San Francisco.

Pa looked uncomfortable. "Mr Johnstone is buying it."

My mouth dropped. James H Johnstone was as dandified a city-slicker as you'd ever hope to meet. He'd blown into town on the weekly Zephyr Speedball, and skinny Tommy Benson had hauled his three huge steamer trunks to the cowboy hotel. He'd tipped Tommy two dollars, in Wells-Fargo notes, and later, in the empty lot behind the smithy, all the kids in New Jerusalem had gathered 'round Tommy to goggle at the small fortune in queer, never-seen bills.

"Pa, no!" I said, without thinking. I knew that if my chums ordered their fathers around like that, they'd get a whipping, but my Pa almost never whipped me.

He smiled, and stretched his thick moustache across his face. "James, I know you love the store, but it's already been decided. Once you've been to France, you'll see that it has wonders that beat anything that store can deliver."

"Nothing's better than the store," I said.

He laughed and rumpled my hair. "Don't be so sure, son. There

are more things in heaven and earth then are dreamed of in your philosophy." It was one of his sayings, from Shakespeare, who he'd studied back east, before I was born. It meant that the discussion was closed.

I decided to withhold judgement until I saw France, but still couldn't shake the feeling that my Pa was going soft in the head. Mr Johnstone wasn't fit to run an apple-cart. He was short and skinny and soft, not like my Pa, who, as far as I was concerned, was the biggest, strongest man in the whole world. I loved my Pa.

Well, when we packed our bags and Pa went into the horsebarn to hitch up our team, I figured we'd be taking a short trip out to the train station. All my chums were waiting there to see us off, and I'd promised my best pal Oly Sweynsdatter that I'd give him my coonskin cap to wear until we came back. But instead, Pa rode us to the edge of town, where the road went to rutted trail and salt flats, and there was Mr James H Johnstone, in his own fancy-pants trap. Pa and me moved our luggage into Johnstone's trap and got inside with Mama and hunkered down so, you couldn't see us from outside. Mama said, "You just hush up now, James. There's parts of this trip that we couldn't tell you about before we left, but you're going to have to stay quiet and hold onto your questions until we get to where we're going."

I nearly said, "To where we're going?" but I didn't, because Mama had never looked so serious in all my born days. So I spent an hour hunkered down in there, listening to the clatter of the wheels and trying to guess where we were going. When I heard the trap stop and a set of wooden doors close, all my guesses dried up and blew away, because I couldn't think of anywhere we would've heard those sounds out in the desert.

So imagine my surprise when I stood up and found us right in our very own horsebarn, having made a circle around town and back to where we'd started from! Mama held a finger up to her lips and then took Mr Johnstone's soft, girlish hand as he helped her down from the trap.

My Pa and Mr Johnstone started shifting one of the piles of hay-bales that stacked to the rafters, until they had revealed a triple-bolted door that looked new and sturdy, fresh-sawn edges still bright and yellow, and not the weathered brown of the rest of the barn.

Pa took a key ring out of his vest pocket and unlocked the door, then swung it open. Each of us shouldered our bags and walked through, in eerie silence, into a pitch black room.

Pa reached out and pulled the door shut, then there was a sharp click and we were in 1975.

1975 was a queer sight. Our apartment was a lozenge of silver, spoked into the hub of a floating null-gee doughnut. Pa did something fancy with his hands and the walls went transparent, and I swear, I dropped to the floor and hugged the nubby rubber tiles for all I was worth. My eyes were telling me that we were hundreds of yards off the ground, and while I'd jumped from the rafters of the horsebarn into the hay countless times, I suddenly discovered that I was afraid of heights.

After that first dizzying glimpse of 1975, I kept my eyes squeezed shut and held on for all I was worth. After a minute or two of this, my stomach told me that I wasn't falling, and I couldn't hear any rushing wind, any birdcalls, anything except Mama and Pa laughing, fit to bust. I opened one eye and snuck a peek. My folks were laughing so hard they had to hold onto each other to stay up, and they were leaning against thin air, Pa's back pressed up against nothing at all.

Cautiously, I got to my feet and walked over to the edge. I extended one finger and it bumped up against an invisible wall, cool and smooth as glass in winter.

"James," said my Pa, smiling so wide that his thick moustache stretched all the way across his face, "welcome to 1975."

Pa's ambassadorial mission meant that he often spent long weeks away from home, teleporting in only for Sunday dinner, the stink of aliens and distant worlds clinging to him even after he washed up. The last Sunday dinner I had with him, Mama had made mashed potatoes and corn bread and sausage gravy and turkey, spending the whole day with the wood-fired cooker back in 1898 (actually, it was 1901 by then, but I always thought of it as 1898). She'd moved the cooker into the horsebarn after a week of wrestling with the gadgets we had in our 1975 kitchen, and when Pa had warned her that the smoke was going to raise questions in New Jerusalem, she explained that she was going to run some flexible exhaust hose through the door into 75 and into our apt's air-scrubber. Pa had

shook his head and smiled at her, and every Sunday, she dragged the exhaust pipe through the door.

That night, Pa sat down and said grace, and he was in his shirtsleeves with his suspenders down, and it almost felt like home — almost felt like a million Sunday dinners eaten by gaslight, with a sweaty pitcher of lemonade in the middle of the table, and seasonal wildflowers, and a stinky cheroot for Pa afterwards as he tipped his chair back and rested one hand on his belly, as if he couldn't believe how much Mama had managed to stuff him this time.

"How are your studies coming, James?" he asked me, when the robutler had finished clearing the plates and clattered away into its nook.

"Very well, sir. We're starting calculus now." Truth be told, I hated calculus, hated Isaac Newton and asymptotes and the whole smelly business. Even with the viral learning shots, it was like swimming in molasses for me.

"Calculus! Well, well, well —" this was one of Pa's catch-all phrases, like "How about that?" or "What do you know?" "Well, well, well. I can't believe how much they stuff into kids' heads here."

"Yes, sir. There's an awful lot left to learn, yet." We did a subject every two weeks. So far, I'd done French, Molecular and Cellular Biology, Physics and Astrophysics, Esperanto, Cantonese and Mandarin, and an alien language whose name translated as "Standard." I'd been exempted from History, of course, along with the other kids there from the past — the Chinese girl from the Ming Dynasty, the Roman boy, and the Injun kid from South America.

Pa laughed around his cigar and crossed his legs. His shoes were so big, they looked like canoes. "There surely is, son. There surely is. And how are you doing with your classmates? Any tussles your teacher will want to talk to me about?"

"No, sir! We're friendly as all get-out, even the girls." The kids in 75 didn't even notice what they were doing in school. They just sat down at their workstations and waited to have their brains filled with whatever was going on, and left at three, and never complained about something being too hard or too dull.

"That's good to hear, son. You've always been a good boy. Tell you what: you bring home a good report this Christmas, and I'll take you to see Saturn's rings on vacation."

Mama shot him a look then, but he pretended he didn't see it. He

stubbed out his cigar, hitched up his suspenders, and put on his tailcoat and tophat and ambassadorial sash and picked up his leather case.

"Good night, son. Good night, Ulla. I'll see you on Wednesday," he said, and stepped into the teleporter.

That was the last time I ever saw him.

"He died from bad snails?" Oly Sweynsdatter said to me, yet again.

I balled up a fist and stuck it under his nose. "For the last time, yes. Ask me again, and I'll feed you this."

I'd been back for a month, and in all that time, Oly had skittered around me like a shy pony, always nearby but afraid to talk to me. Finally, I'd grabbed him and shook him and told him not to be such a ninny, tell me what was on his mind. He wanted to know how my Pa had died, over in France. I told him the reason that Mama and Mr Johnstone and the man from the embassy had worked out together. Now, I regretted it. I couldn't get him to shut up.

"Sorry, all right, sorry!" he said, taking a step backwards. We were in the orchard behind the schoolyard, chucking rotten apples at the tree-trunks to watch them splatter. "Want to hear something?"

"Sure," I said.

"Tommy Benson's sweet on Marta Helprin. It's disgusting. They hold hands — in church! None of the fellows will talk to him."

I didn't see what the big deal was. Back in 75, we had had a two-week session on sexual reproduction, like all the other subjects. Most of the kids there were already in couples, sneaking off to low-gee bounceataria and renting private cubes with untraceable cash-tokens. I'd even tussled with one girl, Katebe M'Buto, another exchange student, from United Africa Trading Sphere. I'd picked her up at her apt, and her father had even shaken my hand — they grow up fast in UATS. Of course, I'd never let on to my folks. Pa would've broken an axle. "That's pretty disgusting, all right," I said, unconvincingly.

"You want to go down to the river? I told Amos and Luke that I'd meet them after lunch."

I didn't much feel like it, but I didn't know what else to do. We walked down to the swimming hole, where some boys were already naked, swimming and horsing around. I found myself looking away,

conscious of their nudity in a way that I'd never been before — all the boys in town swam there, all summer long.

I turned my back to the group and stripped down, then ran into the water as quick as I could.

I paddled around a little, half-heartedly, and then I found myself being pulled under! My sinuses filled with water and I yelled a stream of bubbles, and closed my mouth on a swallow of water. Strong hands pulled at my ankles. I kicked out as hard as I could, and connected with someone's head. The hands loosened and I shot up like a cork, sputtering and coughing. I ran for the shore, and saw one of the Allen brothers surfacing, rubbing at his head and laughing. The four Allen boys lived on a ranch with their parents out by the salt flats, and we only saw them when they came into town with their folks for supplies. I'd never liked them, but now, I saw red.

"You pig!" I shouted at him. "You stupid, rotten, pig! What the heck do you think you were doing?"

The Allens kept on laughing — I used to know some of their names, but in the time I'd been in 75, they'd grown as indistinguishable as twins: big, hard boys with their heads shaved for lice. They pointed at me and laughed. I scooped up a flat stone from the shore and threw it at the head of the one who'd pulled me under, as hard as I could.

Lucky for him — and me! — I was too angry to aim properly, and the stone hit him in the shoulder, knocking him backwards. He shouted at me — it was like a roar of a wild animal — and the four brothers charged.

Oly appeared at my side. "Run!" he shouted.

I was too angry. I balled my fists and stood my ground. The first one shot out of the water towards me, and punched me so hard in the guts, I saw stars. I fell to the ground, gasping. I looked up at a forest of strong, bare legs, and knew they'd surrounded me.

"It's the Sheriff!" Oly shouted. The legs disappeared. I struggled to my knees.

Oly collapsed to the ground beside me, laughing. "Did you see the way they ran? The Sheriff never comes down to the river!"

"Thanks," I said, around gasps, and started to get dressed.

"Any time," he said. "Now, let's do some swimming."

"No, I gotta go home and help Mama," I lied. I didn't feel like going skinny dipping anymore — maybe never again.

Oly gave me a queer look. "OK. See you."

I went straight home, pelting down the road as fast as I could, not even looking where I was going. I let the door slam behind me and took the stairs two at a time up to the attic ladder, then bolted the trap-door shut behind me and sat in the dark, with my knees in my chest.

Down below, Mama let out a half-hearted, "James? Is that you?" like she always did since I came back home. I ignored her, like always, and she stopped worrying about it, like always.

Pa's last trip had been to the Dalai Lama's court in 1975. The man from the embassy said that he was going to talk with the monks about a "white-paper that the two embassies were jointly presenting on the effect of mimetic ambassadorships on the reincarnated soul." It was all nonsense to me. He'd never arrived. The teleporter said that it had put him down gentle as you like on the floor of the Lama's floating castle over the Caspian Sea, but the monks never saw him.

And that was that.

It had been a month since our return. I'd ventured out into town and looked up my chums, and found them so full of gossip that didn't mean anything to me; so absorbed with games that seemed childish to me; so strange, that I'd retreated home. I'd prowled around our house like a burglar at first, and when I came back to the attic, all the numbness that had enveloped me since the man from the State Department had teleported into our apt melted away and I started bawling.

The attic had always been Pa's domain. He'd come up here with whatever crackpot invention he'd ordered this month out of a catalog or one of the expensive, foreign journals he subscribed to, and tinker and swear and hit his thumbnail and tear his pants on a stray dingus and smoke his cheroots and have a heck of a time.

The muffled tread of his feet and the distant cursing while I sat in the parlour downstairs had been the homiest sound I knew. Mama and I would lock eyes every time a particularly forceful round of hollers shook down, and Mama would get a little smile and her eyes would crinkle, and I felt like we were sharing a secret.

Now, the attic was my private domain: there was the elixir shelf, full of patent medicines, hair-tonics, and soothing syrups. There was the bookcase full of wild theories and fantastic adventure stories.

There were the crates full of dangerous, coal-fired machines — an automatic clothes-washing-machine, a cherry-pitter, and other devices whose nature I couldn't even guess at. None of them had ever worked, but I liked to run my hands over them, feel the smooth steel of their parts, disassemble and reassemble them. Back in 75, I'd once tried to take the robutler apart, just to get a look at how it was all put together, but it was a lost cause — I couldn't even figure out how to get the cover off.

I walked through the cool dark, the only light coming from the grimy attic window, and fondled each piece. I picked up an oilcan and started oiling the joints and bearings and axles of each machine in turn. Pa would have wanted to know that everything was in good working order.

"I think you should be going to school, James," Mama said, at breakfast. I'd already done my morning chores, bringing in the coal, chopping kindling, taking care of the milch-cows and making my bed.

I took another forkful of sausage, and a spoonful of mush, chewed, and looked at my plate.

"It's time, it's time. You can't spend the rest of your life sulking around here. Your father would have wanted us to get on with our lives."

Even though I wasn't looking at her when she said this, I knew that her eyes were bright with tears, the way they always got when she mentioned Pa. His chair sat, empty, at the head of the table. I had another bite of sausage.

"James Arthur Nicholson! Look at me when I speak to you!"

I looked up, reflexively, as I always did when she used my full name. My eyes slid over her face, then focused on a point over her left shoulder.

"Yes'm."

"You're going to school. Today. And I expect to get a good report from Mr Adelson."

"Yes'm."

We have two schools in New Jerusalem: the elementary school that was built twenty years before, when they put in the wooden sidewalks and the town hall; and the non-denominational Academy that was built just before I left for 1975.

Miss Tannenbaum, a spinster lady with a moustache and a bristling German accent terrorised the little kids in the elementary school — I'd been stuck in her class for five long years. Mr Adelson, who was raised in San Francisco and who had worked as a roustabout, a telegraph operator and a merchant seaman taught the Academy, and his wild stories were all Oly could talk about.

He raised one eyebrow quizzically when I came through the door at 8:00 that morning. He was tall, like my Pa, but Pa had been as big as an ox, and Mr Adelson was thin and wiry. He wore rumpled pants and a shirt with a wilted celluloid collar. He had a skinny little beard that made him look like a gentleman pirate, and used some shiny pomade to grease his hair straight back from his high forehead. I caught him reading, thumbing the hand-written pages of a leatherbound volume.

"Mr Adelson?"

"Why, James Nicholson! What can I do for you, sonny?" New Jerusalem only had but 2,000 citizens, and only a hundred or so in town proper, so of course he knew who I was, but it surprised me to hear him pronounce my name in his creaky, weatherbeaten voice.

"My mother says I have to go to the Academy."

"She does, hey? How do you feel about that?"

I snuck a look at his face to see if he was putting me on, but I couldn't tell — he'd raised up his other eyebrow now, and was looking hard at me. There might have been the beginning of a smile on his face, but it was hard to tell with the beard. "I guess it don't matter how I feel."

"Oh, I don't know about that. This is a school, not a prison, after all. How old are you?"

"Fourteen. Sir."

"That would put you in with the seniors. Do you think you can handle their course of study? It's half-way through the semester now, and I don't know how much they taught you when you were over in," he swallowed, "France."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just stared at my hard, uncomfortable shoes.

"How are your maths? Have you studied geometry? Basic algebra?"

"Yes, sir. They taught us all that." And lots more besides. I had the feeling of icebergs of knowledge floating in my brain, ready to crest the waves and crash against the walls of my skull.

"Very good. We will be studying maths today in the seniors' class. We'll see how you do. Is that all right?"

Again, I didn't know if he was really asking, so I just said, "Yes, sir."

"Marvelous. We'll see you at the 8:30 bell, then. And James —" he paused, waited until I met his gaze. His eyebrows were at rest. "I'm sorry about your father. I'd met him several times. He was a good man."

"Thank you, sir," I said, unable to look away from his stare.

The first half of the day passed with incredible sloth, as I copied down problems to my slate and pretended to puzzle over them before writing down the answer I'd known the minute I saw the question.

At lunch I found a seat at the base of the big willow out front of the school and unwrapped the waxed paper from the thick ham sandwich Mama had fixed me. I munched it and conjugated Latin verbs in my head, trying to make the day pass. Oly and the fellows were roughhousing in the yard, playing follow-the-leader with Amos Gundersen out front, showing off by walking on his hands and then springing upright. Amos' mother came from circus people in Russia, and all the kids in his family wanted to be acrobats when they grew up.

I tried not to watch them.

I was engrossed in a caterpillar that was crawling up my pants-leg when Mr Adelson cleared his throat behind me. I started, and the caterpillar tumbled to the ground, and then Mr Adelson was squatting on his long haunches at my side.

"How are you liking your first day, James?" he asked, in his raspy voice.

"It's fine, sir."

"And the work? You're able to keep up with the class?"

"It's not a problem for me. We studied this when I was away."

"Are you bored? Do you need more of a challenge?"

"It's fine, sir." _Unless you want to assign me some large-prime factoring problems_.

"Right, then. Don't hesitate to call on me if things are moving too slowly or too quickly. I mean that."

I snuck another look at him. He seemed sincere.

"Why aren't you playing with your chums?"

"I don't feel like it."

"You just wanted to think?"

"I guess so." Why wouldn't he just leave me alone?

"It's hard to come home, isn't it?"

I stared at my shoes. What did he know about it?

"I've been around the world, you know that? I sailed with a tramp steamer, the Slippery Trick. I saw the naked savages of Polynesia, and the voodoo witches that the freed slaves of the Caribbean worship, and the coolies pulling rickshaws in Peking. It was so hard to come home to Frisco, after five years at sea."

To my surprise, he sat down next to me, in the dirt and roots at the base of the tree. "You know, aboard the Trick, they called me Runnyguts — I threw up every hour for my first month. I was more reliable than the Watch! But they didn't mean anything by it. When you live with a crew for years, you become a different person. We'd be out at sea, nothing but water as far as the eye could see, and we'd be playing cards on-deck. We'd told each other every joke we knew already, and every story about home, and we knew that deck of cards so well, which one had salt-water stains on the back and which one turned up at corner and which one had been torn, and we'd just scream at the sun, so bored! But then we'd put in to port at some foreign city, and we'd come down the plank in our best clothes, twenty men who knew each other better than brothers, hard and brown from months at sea, and it felt like whatever happened in that strange port-of-call, we'd come out on top."

"And then I came back to the Frisco, and the Captain shook my hand and gave me a sack of gold and saw me off, and I'd never felt so alone, and I'd never seen a place so foreign.

"I went back to my old haunts, the saloons where I'd gone for a beer after a day's work at the docks, and the dance-halls, and the theatres, and I saw my old chums. That was hard, James."

He stopped then. I found myself saying, "How was it hard, Mr Adelson?"

He looked surprised, like he'd forgotten that he was talking to me. "Well, James, it's like this: when you're away that long, you get to invent yourself all over again. Of course, everyone invents themselves as they grow up. Your chums there —" he gestured at the boys, who were now trying, with varying success, to turn somersaults, dirtying their school clothes "— they're inventing themselves right now, whether they know it or not. The smart one,

the strong one, the brave one, the sad one. It's going on while we watch!

"But when you go away, nobody knows you, and you can be whoever you want. You can shed your old skin and grow a new one. When we put out to sea, I was just a youngster, eighteen years old and fresh from my Pa's house. He was a cablecar engineer, and wanted me to follow in his shoes, get an apprenticeship and join him there under the hills, oiling the giant pulleys. But no, not me! I wanted to put out to sea and see the world. I'd never been out of the city, can you believe that? The first port where I took shore leave was in Haiti, and when I stepped onto the dock, it was like my life was starting all over again. I got a tattoo, and I drank hard liquor, and gambled in the saloons, and did all the things that a man did, as far as I was concerned." He had a faraway look now, staring at the boys' game without seeing it. "And when I got back on-board, sick and tired and broke, there was a new kid there, a negro from Port-Au-Prince who'd signed on to be a cabin boy. His name was Jean-Paul, and he didn't speak a word of English and I didn't speak a word of French. But I took him under my wing, James, and acted like I'd been at sea all my life, and showed him the ropes, and taught him to play cards, and bossed him around, and taught him English, one word at a time.

"And that became the new me. Every time a new hand signed on, I would be his teacher, his mentor, his guide.

"And then I came home.

"As far as the folks back home were concerned, I was the kid they'd said good-bye to five years before. My father thought I was still a kid, even though I'd fought pirates and weathered storms. My chums wanted me to be the kid I'd been, and do all the boring, kid things we'd done before I left — riding the trolleys, watching the vaudeville shows, fishing off the docks.

"Even though that stuff was still fun, it wasn't me, not anymore. I missed the old me, and felt him slipping away. So, you know what I did?"

"You moved to New Jerusalem?"

"I moved to New Jerusalem. Well, to Salt Lake City, first. I studied with the Jesuits, to be a teacher, then I saw an ad for a teacher in the paper, and I packed my bag and caught the next train. And here I am, not the me that came home from sea, and not the me who I was before I went to sea, but someone in between, a

new me — teaching, but on dry land, and not chasing dangerous adventures, but still reading my old log-book and smiling."

We sat for a moment, in companionable silence. Then, abruptly, he checked his pocket watch and yelped. "Damn! Lunch was over twenty minutes ago!" He leapt to his feet, as smoothly as a boy, and ran into the schoolhouse to ring the bell.

I folded up the waxed-paper, and thought about this adult who talked to me like an adult, who didn't worry about swearing, or telling me about his adventures, and I made my way back to class.

It went better, the rest of that day.

In 75, Pa had almost never been home, but his presence was always around us.

I'd call the robutler out of its closet and have it affix its electrode fingertips to my temples and juice my endorphins after a hard day at school, and when I was done, the faint smell of Pa's hair-oil, picked up from the 'trodes and impossible to be rid of, would cling to me. Or I'd sit down on the oubliette and find one of Pa's journals from back home, well-thumbed and open to an article on mental telepathy. We did ESP in school, and it was all about a race of alien traders who communicated in geometric thought pictures that took forever to translate. We'd never learned about Magnetism and Astral Projection and all the other things Pa's journals were full of.

And while I never doubted the things in Pa's journals, I never brought them up in class, neither. There were lots of different kinds of truth.

"James?"

"Yes, Mama?" I said, on my way out to chop kindling.

"Did you finish your homework?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Good boy."

Homework had been some math, and some biology, and some geology. I'd done it before I left school.

The report cards came out in the middle of December. Mr Adelson sealed them with wax in thick brown envelopes and handed them out at the end of the day. Sealing them was a dirty trick — it mean a boy would have to go home not knowing whether to expect a whipping or an extra slice of pie, and the fellows were as nervous as long-tailed cats in a rocking-chair factory when class

let out. For once, there was no horseplay afterwards.

I came home and tossed the envelope on the kitchen table without a moment's worry. I'd aced every test, I'd done every take-home assignment, I'd led the class, in a bored, sleepy way, regurgitating the things they'd stuck in my brain in 1975.

I went up to the attic and started reading one of Pa's adventure stories, Tarzan of the Apes, by the Frenchman, Jules Verne. Pa had all of Verne's books, each of them crisply autographed on the inside cover. He'd met Verne on one of his diplomatic missions, and the two had been like two peas in a pod, to hear him tell of it — they both subscribed to all the same crazy journals.

I was reading my favorite part, where Tarzan meets the man in the balloon, when Mama's voice called from downstairs. "James Arthur Nicholson! Get your behind down here now!"

I jumped like I was stung and rattled down the attic stairs so fast I nearly broke my neck and then down into the parlour, where Mama was holding my report card and looking fit to bust.

"Yes, Mama?" I said. "What is it?"

She handed me the report card and folded her arms over her chest. "Explain that, mister. Make it good."

I read the card and my eyes nearly jumped out of my head. The rotten so-and-so had given me F's all the way down, in every subject. Below, in his seaman's hand, he'd written, "James' performance this semester has disappointed me gravely. I would like it very much if I could meet with you and he, Mrs Nicholson, at your earliest convenience, to discuss his future at the Academy. Signed, Rbt. Adelson."

Mama grabbed my ear and twisted. I howled and dropped the card. Before I knew what was happening, she had me over her knee and was paddling my bottom with her open hand, hard.

"I don't" — whack — "know _what_" — whack — "you think" — whack — "you're doing, James." — whack — "If your _father_" — whack, whack — "were here," — whack — "he'd switch you" — whack — "within an inch of your life." And she gave me a load more whacks.

I was too stunned even to cry or howl. Pa had only beat me twice in all the time I'd known him. Mama had never beat me. My bottom ached distantly, and I felt tears come to my eyes.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Mama, it's a mistake —" I began.

"You're durn right!" she said.

"No, really! I did all my homework! I passed all the exams! I showed 'em to you! You saw 'em!" The unfairness of it made my heart hammer in time to the throbbing of my backside.

Mama's breath fumed angrily out of her nose. "You go straight to your room and stay there. We're going to see Mr Adelson first thing tomorrow morning."

"What about my chores?" I said.

"Oh, don't worry about that. You'll have plenty of chores to do when I let you out."

I went to my room and stripped down, and lay on my tummy and cracked my window so the icy winter air blew over my backside. I cried a vale of tears, and rained down miserable, mean curses on everyone: Mama, Pa, and especially the lying, snaky, backstabbing Runnyguts Adelson.

Mama didn't get any less mad through the night, but when she came to my door at cock-crow, she seemed to be holding it in better. My throat and eyes were sore as sandpaper from crying, and Mama gave me exactly five minutes to wash up and dress before dragging me out to the horsebarn. She'd already hitched up our team and refused my hand when I tried to help her up.

I'd been angry and righteous when I woke, but seeing Mama's towering, barely controlled fury changed my mood to dire terror. I stared out at the trees and farms as we rode into town, feeling like a condemned man being taken to the gallows.

Mama pulled up out front of the Academy and marched me around back to the teacher's cottage. She rapped on the door and waited, blowing clouds of steam out of her nose into the frosty morning air.

Mr Adelson answered the door in shirtsleeves and suspenders, unshaved and bleary. His hair, normally neatly oiled and slicked, stuck out like frayed broom-straw. The muscles on his thin arms stood out like snakes. He blinked at us, standing on his doorstep. "Mrs Nicholson!" he said.

"Mr Adelson," my mother said. "We've come to discuss James' report card."

Mr Adelson smoothed his hair back and stepped aside. "Please, come in. Can I offer you some coffee?"

"No, thank you," Mama said, primly, standing in his foyer. He

held out his hand for her coat and kerchief and she handed them to him. I took off my coat and struggled out of my boots. He took them both and put them away in a closet.

"I'm going to have some coffee. Are you sure I can't offer you a cup?"

"No. Thank you, all the same."

"As you wish." He disappeared down the dark hallway, and Mama and I found our way into his tiny parlour. Books were stacked every which where, dusty and precarious. Mama and I sat down in a pair of cushioned chairs, and Mr Adelson came in, holding two mugs of coffee. He set one down next to Mama on the floor, then smacked himself in the forehead. "You said no, didn't you? Sorry, I'm not quite awake yet. Well, leave it there — there's cream in it, maybe the cat will have some."

He settled himself onto another chair and sipped at his coffee. "Let's start over, shall we? Hello, Mrs Nicholson. Hello, James. I understand you're here to discuss James' report card."

Mama sat back a little in her chair and let hint of a sardonic smile show on her face. "Yes, we are. Forgive my coming by unannounced."

"Oh, it's nothing."

Mr Adelson drank more coffee. Mama smoothed her skirts. I kicked my feet against the rungs of my chair. Finally, it was too much for me. "What's the big idea, anyway?" I said, glaring daggers at him. "I don't deserve no F!"

"Any F," Mr Adelson corrected. "Why don't you think so?"

"Well, because I did all my homework. I gave the right answers in class. I passed all the tests. It ain't fair!"

"Not fair," my Mama corrected, gently. She was staring distractedly at Mr Adelson.

"What you say is true enough, James. What grade do you suppose you should've gotten?"

"Why, an A! An A-plus! Perfect!" I said, glaring again at him, daring him to say otherwise.

"Is that what an A-plus is for, James? Perfection?"

"Sure," I said, opening my mouth without thinking.

Mama shifted her stare to me. She was looking even more thoughtful.

"Why do you suppose you go to school?"

"'Cause Mama says I have to," I said, sullenly.

"James!" Mama said.

"Oh, I suppose it's to learn things," I said.

Mr Adelson smiled and nodded, the way he did when one of the students got the right answer in class. "Well?"

"Well, what?" I said.

"What did you learn this semester?"

"Why, everything you taught! Geometry! Algebra! Latin! Geography! Biology! Physics! Grammar!"

"I see," he said. "James, what's the formula for determining the constant in the second derivative of an equation?"

I knew that one: it was one of Newton's dirty calculus proofs. "It's a trick question. There's no way to get the constant of second derivative."

"Exactly right," he said.

"Yes," I said, and folded my arms across my chest.

"Where did you learn that?"

"In —" I started to say 1975, but caught myself. "In France."

"Yes."

"Yes," I said. The fingers of dawn crept across my comprehension. "Oh."

Mama smiled at me.

"But it's not fair! So what if I already knew everything before I started? I still did all the work."

"Why are you in school, James?" Mr Nicholson asked me again.

"To learn."

"Well, then I think you'd better start learning something, don't you? You're the brightest student in the class. You're certainly smarter than I am — I'm just an old sailor struggling along with the rest of the class. But you, you've got it. You've been marking time in class all semester, and I daresay you haven't learned a single thing since you started. That's why you got F's."

"Mr Adelson," Mama said. "Am I to understand that James performed all his assignments satisfactorily?"

It was Mr Adelson's turn to squirm. "Yes, but madam, you have to understand —"

Mama waved aside his objections. "If James satisfactorily completed all the work assigned to him, then I think he should have a grade that reflects that, don't you?" She took a sip of her coffee.

"Yes, well —"

"However, you do have a point. I didn't send my son to your

school so that he could mark time, as you put it. I sent him there to learn. To be taught. Have you taught him anything, Mr Adelson?"

Mr Adelson looked so all-fired sad, I forgave him the report card and spoke up. "Yes, Mama."

Mama swiveled her head to me. "Really?"

"Yes. He taught me what I was at school for. Just now."

"I see," Mama said. "This is very good coffee, Mr Adelson."

"Thank you," he said, and sipped at his.

"James," Mr Adelson said. "You've learned your first lesson. What do you propose your second should be?"

"I dunno," I said, and went back to kicking the rungs of the chair.

"What is it that you have been doing since you came back to town, son?" he asked.

"Hanging around in the attic, mostly. Reading. Tinkering. Like my Pa."

"My husband's machines and journals are up there," Mama explained.

"And his books," I said.

"Books?" Mr Adelson looked suddenly interested. "What kind of books?"

"Adventure stories. Stevenson. Wells. Some of it's in French. We have all of Verne."

"Well, perhaps that can be your next assignment. I would like to see an original composition of no less than twenty pages, discussing each work of Verne's, charting his literary progress. Due January fifth, please."

"Twenty pages!" I said. "But it's the holidays!"

"Very well. Whatever length the piece turns out is fine. But be sure you do justice to each work."

By the time I got through with the assignment, it was thirty-eight pages long. I never thought I could write that much but it kept on coming, new thoughts about each book, each scene, the different worlds Verne had built: the fantastic slopes of Barsoom, the sinister Island of Dr Moreau… Each one spawned a new insight. I felt like the Verne's detective, Sherlock Holmes, assembling all of the seemingly insignificant details into some kind of coherent picture, finding the improbable links between the wildly different stories the Frenchman told.

Mama was thrilled to see me working, papers spread out all

around me on the kitchen table — I could've used Pa's study, but it felt like an invasion, somehow — writing until my wrists cramped. She let me get away without doing my chores, rising early to milk the cow, bringing in the eggs from the henhouse, even chopping the kindling. Just so long as I was writing, she was happy to let me go on shirking my responsibilities.

Even on Christmas Eve, I was too distracted to really enjoy the smells of goose and ham and the stuffing Mama spent days preparing. I was still writing when she told me to go change and set the table for three.

"We're having Mr Johnston to dinner," she said.

I made a face. Mr Johnston was the only one in town that I could have talked to about my time in 1975, but I never did. He had a way of bossing a fellow around while seeming to be nice to him. He still ran Pa's store, using ladders to reach the high shelves that Pa had just plucked things off of. I had to see him when Mama sent me on errands there, but I made sure that I left as quickly as I could. Mama kept saying that I should ask him for a job, but I was pretty good at changing the subject whenever it came up.

I put away my papers and changed into my Sunday clothes. I'd been hinting to Mama lately that a boy just wasn't complete without a puppy, so I put an extra shine on my shoes and said a quick prayer that I wouldn't find socks and picture-books under the tree.

Mr Johnstone arrived with a double-armload of gifts. Well, he did run my Pa's store, after all, so he could get things wholesale. I took his parcels from him and set them under the tree. Then that dandified sissy actually kissed my Mama on the cheek, lifting a sprig of mistletoe up with one hand. When Pa and Mama stood together, she'd barely come up to his shoulder, while Mr Johnstone had to stand on tiptoe to get the mistletoe over their heads. "Merry Christmas, Ulla," he said.

She took his hands and said, "Merry Christmas, James."

I wanted to be sick.

Mr Johnstone had a whiskey in our parlour before we ate, sitting in my Pa's chair, smoking a cigar from my Pa's humidor. Mama ordered me to keep him company while she set out the meal.

"Do they call you Jimmy?" he asked me, staring down his long, pointy nose.

"No, sir. James."

"It's a fine name, isn't it? Served me well, man and boy." He made a face that was supposed to be funny, like he'd bit into a lemon.

"I like it fine, sir."

"Are you having any problems adjusting, now that you're home? Finding it hard to relate to the other fellows?"

"No, sir."

"You don't find it strange, after seeing 1975?"

"No, sir. It's home."

"Ha!" he said, as though I'd said something profound. "I guess it is, at that. Say, why don't you come by the store some time? I just got some samples from a new candy company in Oregon, and I need to get an unbiased opinion before I order." He gave me a pinched smile, like he thought he was Santa Claus.

"Mama doesn't like me eating sweets," I said, and stared at my reflection in my shoes.

Mama rescued me by coming into the parlour then, looking young and pretty in her best dress. "Dinner is served, gentlemen."

We followed her into the dining room, and Mr Johnstone took my Pa's seat at the head of the table and carved the goose. Even though the bird was brown and juicy, I found I didn't have any appetite.

"I have word from Pondicherry," Mr Johnstone said, as he poured gravy over his second helping of mashed potatoes.

"Yes?" Mama said.

"Who's he?" I asked.

"Your father's successor," Mr Johnstone said. "A British officer from New Delhi. A fat little man, and awfully full of himself."

I repressed a snort. For my money Mr Johnstone was as full of himself as one man could be. I couldn't imagine a blacker kettle.

"He says that Nussbaum, from 1952 New York, has rolled back relations with extraterrestrials by fifty years. He sold a Centurian half a million defective umbrellas from his brother-in-law's factory. The New Yorkers are all defending him. Caveat emptor."

"I never could keep track of who was friendly and who wasn't," Mama said. "It was all Greek to me. Politics."

Mr Johnstone opened his mouth to explain, but Mama held up one hand. "No, no, I don't want to understand. Les used to lecture me about this from dawn to dusk." She smiled a little sad smile and stared off at the cabbage-roses on our dining-room walls. Mr Johnstone put one hand over hers.

"He was a good man, Ulla."

Mama stood and smoothed her skirts. "I'll get dessert."

I didn't get a puppy. Mr Johnstone gave me an air-rifle that I was sure Mama would have fits over, but she just smiled. She gave me a beautiful fountain-pen and a green blotter and a ream of creamy, thick paper.

The pen made the most beautiful, jet-black marks, and the paper drank it up like a thirsty man in the desert. I recopied my essay the next day, sitting with Mama in the parlour while she darned socks. Mr Johnstone had given her a tin of cosmetics from Paris, that he'd ordered in special. I'd heard Mama say that only dancehall girls wore makeup, but she blushed when he gave it to her. I gave her a carving I'd done, of the robutler we'd had in 75. I'd whittled it out of a block of pine, and sanded it and oiled it until it was as smooth as silk.

Oly Sweynsdatter came by after supper and asked if I wanted to go out and play with the fellows. To my surprise, I found I did. We had a grand afternoon pelting each other with snow-balls, a game that turned into a full-scale war, as all the older boys back from high-school came out and joined in, and then, later, all the men, even the Sheriff and Mr Adelson. I never laughed so much in all my life, even when I got one right in the ear.

Mr Adelson led a charge of adults against the fort that most of the Academy boys were hiding behind, but I saw him planning it and started laying in ammunition long before they made their go, and we sent them back with their tails between their legs. I hit him smack in the behind with one ball as he dove for cover.

Oly's mother gave us both good, Svenska hot cocoa afterwards, with fresh whipped cream, and Oly and I exchanged gifts. He gave me a tin soldier, a Confederate who was caught in the act of falling over backwards, clutching his chest. I gave him my best marble. We followed his mother around their house, recounting the adventures in the snow until she told me it was time for me to go home.

School started again, and I went in early the first day to turn in my paper. Mr Adelson took it without comment and scanned the first few paragraphs. "Thank you, James, I think this will do nicely. I'll have it graded for you in the afternoon."

I met Oly out in the orchard, where he was chopping kindling for the school's stove, a job we all took turns at. "I hear you might be

getting a new Pa for Christmas," he said. He gave me a smile that meant something, but I couldn't guess what.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"My Mama says your Mama had old man Johnstone over for Christmas dinner. And the widow Ott told my Mama that she'd connected one or two calls between your house and the store every day in the last month. My Mama says that Johnstone is courting your Mama."

"Mrs Ott isn't supposed to talk about the calls she connects," I said, as my mind reeled. "It's like a telegraph operator: it's a confidential trust." Mr Adelson had told me that, once when he was telling me stories about his life before he went to sea.

"So, is it true?"

"No!" I said, surprising myself with my vehemence. "My Mama just didn't want him to be alone at Christmas."

Oly swung the axe a few more times. "Well, sure. But what about all the telephone calls?"

"That's business. The store is still partly ours. Mama's just looking after our interests."

"If you say so," he said.

I shoved him hard. I drew a line in the snow with my toe. "I do say so. Step across the line if you say otherwise!"

Oly got to his feet and looked at me. "I don't want to fight with you, James. I was just tellin' you what my Mama said."

"Well, your Mama ought to mind her own business," I said, baiting him.

That did it. He stepped over and popped me one, right in the nose. Oly and I had been chums since we could walk, and we'd had a few fights in our days but this time it was different. I was so angry at him, at my Mama, at my Pa, at New Jerusalem, and we just kept on swinging at each other until Mr Adelson came out to ring the bell and separated us. My nose was sore and I was limping, and I'd torn Oly's jacket and bent his fingers back, so he cradled his hand in the crook of his arm.

"Boys!" Mr Adelson said. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You're supposed to be friends."

His language shocked me, but I was still plenty angry. "He's no friend of mine!" I said.

"That's fine with me," Oly said and glared at me.

The other kids were milling around, and Mr Adelson gave us both

a look that could melt steel, then rang the bell.

I could hardly concentrate in class that day. My Mama getting married? A new Pa? It couldn't be true. But in my mind, I kept seeing my Mama and that Johnstone kissing under the mistletoe, and him sitting in my Pa's chair, drinking his whiskey.

Oly's desk was next to mine, and he kept shooting me dirty looks. Finally, I leaned over and whispered, "Cut it out, you idiot."

Oly said, "You're the idiot. I think you got your brains scrambled in France, James."

"I'll scramble your brains!"

"Gentlemen," said Mr Adelson. "Do you have something you'd like to share with the class?"

"No sir," we said together, and exchanged glares.

"James, perhaps you'd like to come up to the front and finish the lesson?"

"Sir?" I said, looking at the blackboard. He'd been going through quadratics, an elaborate first-principles proof.

"I believe you know this already, don't you? Come up to the front and finish the lesson."

Slowly, I got up from my desk, leaving my slate on my desk, and made my way up to the front. Some of the kids giggled. I picked up a piece of chalk from the chalk-well, and started to write on the board.

Mr Adelson walked back to my seat and sat down. I stopped and looked over my shoulder, and he gave me a little scooting gesture that meant go on. I did, and by the end of the hour, I found that I was enjoying myself. I stopped frequently for questions, and erased the board over and over again, filling it with steady columns of numbers and equations. I stopped noticing Mr Adelson in my seat, and when he stood and thanked me and told us we could eat our lunches, it seemed like no time at all had passed.

Mr Adelson looked up from my essay. "James, I'd like to have a chat with you. Stay behind, please."

"Sit," he said, offering me the chair at his desk. He sat on one of the front-row desks, and stared at me for a long moment.

"What was that mess this morning all about, James?" he asked.

"Oly and I had an argument," I said, sullenly.

"I could see that. What was it about, if you don't mind my asking?"

"He said something about my Mama," I said.

"I see," he said. "Well, having met your mother, I feel confident in saying that she's more than capable of defending herself. Am I right?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Then we won't see a repeat?"

"No, sir," I said. I didn't plan on talking to Oly ever again.

"Then we'll say no more about it. Now, about this morning's lesson: you did very well."

"It was a dirty trick," I said.

He grinned like a pirate. "I suppose it was. I wouldn't have played it on you if I didn't have every confidence in your abilities, though." He leaned across and picked up my essay from his desk. "It was this that convinced me, really. This is as good as anything I've seen in scholarly journals. I've half a mind to send it to the Idler."

"I'm just a kid!"

"You're an extraordinary boy. I'm tempted to let you teach all the classes, and take up whittling."

He said it so deadpan, I couldn't tell if he was kidding me. "Oh, you can't do that! I'm not nearly ready to take over."

He laughed. "You're readier than you think, but I expect the town council would stop my salary unless I did some of the work around here. Still, I think that's the most active I've seen you since you came to my class, and I'm running out of ideas to keep you busy. Maybe I'll keep you teaching maths. I'll give you my lesson plan to take home before school's out."

"Yes, sir."

Mr Adelson gave me a stack of papers tied up with twine after he dismissed the class for the day. I went home and did my chores, then unwrapped the parcel in the parlour. The lesson plans were there, laid out, day by day, and in the centre of them was a smaller parcel, wrapped in coloured paper. "Merry Christmas," was written across it, in his hand.

I opened it, and found a slim book. "War of the Worlds," by Verne. For some reason, it rang a bell. I thought that maybe it had been on our bookcase in 75, but somehow, it hadn't made it back home with us. I opened it, and read the inscription he'd written: "From one traveller to another, Merry Christmas."

I forced myself to read the lesson plans for the next month before

I allowed myself to start the Verne, and once I started, I found I couldn't stop. Mama had to drag me away for dinner.

My trip back to 1975 wasn't planned, but it wasn't an accident, either. We'd gotten a new load of hay in for our team, and Mama added stacking it in the horsebarn to my chores. I'd been consciously avoiding the horsebarn since Pa had disappeared. Every time I looked at it, I felt a little hexed, a little frightened.

But Mama had a philosophy: a boy should face up to his fears. She'd been terrified of spiders when she was a girl, and she told me that she had made a point of picking up every spider she saw and letting it crawl around on her face. After a year of that, she said, she never met a spider that frightened her.

Mama had been sending me to the store more and more, too, and having Mr Johnstone over for dinner every Friday night. She knew I didn't like him one little bit, and she said that I would just have to learn to live with what I didn't like, and if that was the only thing I learned from her, it would be enough.

I preferred the horsebarn.

I worked close to the door the first day, which is no way to do it, of course: if you blocked the door, it just made it harder to get at the back when the time came. The way to do it is to first clear out whatever hay is left over, move it out to the pasture, and then fill in from the back forward.

Mama told me so, that first night, when she came out to inspect my work. "You sure must love working out here," she said. "If you do it that way, you'll be out here stacking for twice as long. Well, you have your fun, but I still expect you to be getting your homework and regular chores done. Come in and clean up for supper now."

I jammed the pitchfork into a bale, and washed for supper.

The next afternoon, I resolved to do it right. I moved the bales I'd stacked up by the door to a corner, and then started cleaning out the back. Before long, I'd uncovered the door into 1975. "James," Mama called, from the house. "Dinner!"

I took a long look at the door. The wood on the edges had aged to the silvery-brown of the rest of the barn-boards, and it looked like it had been there forever. I could hardly remember a time when it wasn't there.

I went in for supper.

The next morning, I picked up my lunch and my schoolbooks, kissed Mama good-bye, and walked out. I stood on our porch for a long time, staring at the horsebarn. I remembered the brave explorers in Verne's books. I looked over my shoulder, at the closed door of our house, then walked slowly to the horsebarn. I swung the door open, then walked to the back. The triple-bolts had rusted somewhat and took real shoving to slide back. One of them was stubborn, so I picked up the rake and pried it back with the handle, thinking of how ingenious that was.

I gave the door my shoulder and shoved, and it swung back, complaining on its hinges. On the other side was the still-familiar dark of our 1975 apartment. I stepped into it, and closed the door behind me.

"Lights," I said, and they came on.

The old place was just like the day we left it. It wasn't even dusty, and as I heard the familiar trundle of the robutler, I knew why. My Pa's easy chair sat in the parlour, with a print-out of the day's Salt Lake City Bugler folded on the side-table. I walked to one wall and laid my palm against it, the familiar cool glassy stuff it was made of. "Window," I said, and wiped a line across the wall. Wherever my hand wiped went transparent. It was a sunny day in 1975 — 1980, by then, but it would be 75 in my mind forever. Under the dome, Greater Salt Lake was warm and tranquil. I saw boys my age scooting around in jet-packs, dodging hover-traffic.

Pa liked to open a big, square window when he came home, and sit in his easy chair and smoke a stinky cigar and read the paper and cluck over it — "Well, well, well," he'd say, and "How about that?" Sometimes, he'd have a tumbler of whiskey. He'd given me some, once, and the stuff had burned like turpentine and I swore I wouldn't try it again for a long, long time.

I sat in Pa's easy chair and snapped up the newspaper, the way he used to. "Panorama," I said, and Pa's square window opened before me. "Whiskey," I said, and "Cigar," because I was never one for half-measures. The robutler trundled over to me with a tumbler and a White Owl in its hover-field. I plucked them out. Cautiously, I put the cigar between my lips. The robutler extruded a long, snaky arm with a flame, and lit it. I took a deep puff, and coughed convulsively. Unthinking, I took a gulp of whiskey. I felt like my lungs had turned inside-out.

I finished both the whiskey and the cigar before I got up, taking

cautious puffs and tiny sips, forcing myself.

My head swam, and nausea nearly drowned me. I staggered into the WC, and hung my head in the oubliette for an eternity, but nothing was coming up. I moved into my old bedroom and splayed out on my bed, watching the ceiling spin. "Lights," I managed to croak, and the room went dark.

When I woke in the morning, the walls were at half-opacity, the normal 0700 schedule, and I dragged myself out of bed.

The robutler had extruded the table and set out my breakfast, ham and eggs and a big bulb of milk. One look at it sent me over the edge, and I left a trail of sick all the way to the WC.

When I was done, I was as wrung-out as a washcloth. My head pounded. The robutler was quietly cleaning up my mess. I started to order it to clear away breakfast, but discovered that I was miraculously hungry. I ate everything on the table and seconds, besides, and had the robutler juice my temples and clear away my headache. I dialed the walls to full transparency, and watched the traffic go by.

The robutler maneuvered itself into my field of vision and flashed a clock on its chest-plate: 0800 0800 0800. It was my old school-alarm. It snapped me back to reality. My Mama was going to whip me raw! She must've been worried sick.

I stood up and ran for the door. It was closed. I punched my code into its panel, and waited. Nothing happened. I calmed myself and punched it again. Still nothing. After trying it a hundred times, I convinced myself that it had been changed.

I summoned the robutler and asked it for the code. Its chest-panel lit up: BAD PROGRAM.

That's when I started to really worry. I was near to tears when I remembered the emergency override. I punched it in.

Nothing happened.

I think I started crying around then. I was stuck in 1975!

I'm not a stupid little kid. I didn't spend much time pewling. Instead, I went to the phone and dialed the police. The screen stayed blank. Feeling like I was in a dream, I went to the teleporter and dialed for my old school and stepped in. I failed to teleport.

Reality sank in.

All outside services to the apartment had been shut off when we

moved out. The only things that still worked were the ones that ran off our reactor, a squat armoured box on the apartment's underbelly. The door in New Jerusalem worked, but on the 1975 side, it needed to communicate with the central office to approve any passage.

I thought about sitting tight and waiting. Mama would be sick with worry, and would check the barn eventually and see the shot bolts. She'd speak to Mr Johnstone, who would send a telegram to Paris, and they would relay the message to 1975, and voila, I'd be rescued. I'd get the whipping of my life, and do extra chores until I was seventy, but it was better than starving to death after the apartment's pantry ran out. I felt hungry just thinking about it.

Still, there was a better way. The null-gee doughnut that our apartment was spoked into had a supply of escape-jumpers, single-use jet-packs with a simple transponder that screamed for help on all the emergency channels. I could ride one of these down into Greater Salt Lake, wait for the police. The more I thought about this plan, the better it sounded. Better, anyway, than sitting around like a fairytale princess, waiting for rescue. In my mind, I was the rescuing type, not the kind that needed rescuing.

Besides, there wasn't much better than riding around in one of those jet-packs.

I cycled the emergency lock into the doughnut, unracked a pack and a jumpsuit that looked like it would fit me, and suited up. The packed whined as it powered up and ran through its diagnostics. I checked the idiot-lights to make sure they were all green, feeling like a real man of action, then I stepped into the exterior lock and jumped, arms and legs streamlined, toes pointed.

The jet-pack coughed to life and kicked me gently, then started lowering me to the ground. The emergency beacon's idiot-light came on, and I heaved a sigh of relief and got comfortable.

The flight was peaceful and dreamlike, a slow descent over the gleaming metal city. I was so engrossed with the view that I didn't see the packjackers until they were already on me. They hit me high and low, two kids about my age with tricked-out custom jet-packs with their traffic beacons broken off. One snagged my knees and hugged them to his chest, while the other took me at the armpits. A voice shouted in my ear: "I'm cutting your pack loose. This is a very, very sharp knife, and when I'm done, I'll be the only thing holding you up. _Don't squirm_."

I didn't even have the chance to squirm. By the time the speech was finished, I was separated from my pack, and I spun over upside-down, and watched it continue its descent, straps dangling in the wind. My hair hung down, and blood filled my head, reawakening my headache. Reflexively, I twisted to get a look at my kidnappers, but stopped immediately as I felt their grips loosen. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed.

The three of us dove fast and hard, and I tasted that second helping of breakfast again before we leveled off. I risked a peek, then squeezed my eyes shut again. We were speeding through the lower levels of Greater Salt Lake, the unmanned freight corridors, impossibly claustrophobic, and at our speed, dangerous.

We cornered tightly so many times that I lost count, and then we slowed to a stop. They dumped me to the ground, steel traction-plate. The wind was knocked out of me, and I was barely conscious of the hands that untabbed my jumpsuit, then began methodically turning out the pockets of my clothes.

"What the hell are you wearing, kid?" one of them asked. It was the same one who'd warned me about squirming. Hearing his voice a second time, I realised that he was younger than I was, maybe ten or eleven. Even then, it didn't occur to me to fight back — he had a knife sharp enough to cut through the safety strapping on my pack.

"Clothes. I'm from 1898 — my Pa's an ambassador. I don't have any money." I struggled into a sitting position, and was knocked onto my back again.

"Stay down and you won't get hurt," the same voice said. It was young enough that I couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. Small hands pressed into my eyes. "No peeking, now."

Another set of hands systematically rifled my coat and pants, then cut them loose and gave the same treatment to my underpants and shirt. I blushed as they were cut loose, too.

"You really don't have any money!" the voice said.

"I said so, didn't I?"

The voice said a dirty word that would've gotten it beaten black-and-blue back home, and then the hands were gone. I looked up just in time to see two small figures jetting away upwards.

I was naked, sitting on a catwalk above a freight corridor, three-quarters of a century and God-knew-how-many miles from home. I didn't cry. I was too worried to cry. I kicked my ruined clothes down into the freight corridor and pulled on the jumpsuit.

Some hero I was!

It was hard work, climbing staircase after staircase, up to the shopping levels. By the time I reached a level where I could see the sky, I was dripping with sweat and my headache had returned.

Foot traffic was light, but what there was pretty frightening. I'd gone walking in 75 before of course, but Greater Salt Lake was a big place, and there were parts of it that an Ambassador's son would never get to see.

This was one of them. The shopfronts were all iris-open airlocks, and had been painted around to look like surprised mouths, or eyes, or, in one fascinating case, a woman's private parts. Mostly, they were betting shops, or bars, or low-rent bounceaterias. Even in 1975, the Saints had some influence in Salt Lake, and the bars and brothels were pretty shameful places, where no respectable person would be caught.

The other pedestrians on the street were mostly off-worlders, either spacers in uniform or extees. In some cases, it was hard to tell which was which.

I kind of slunk along, sticking to the walls, hands in my pockets. I kept my eyes down, except when I was looking around for a public phone. After several blocks, I realised that no one was paying any attention to me, and I took my hands out of my pockets. The sun filtered down over me, warm through the big dome, and I realised that even though I'd gotten myself stuck in 75, been 'jacked, and left in the worst neighbourhood in the whole State, I'd landed on my feet. The thought made me smile. Another kid, say Oly, wouldn't have coped nearly as well.

I still hadn't spied a public phone. I figured that the taprooms would have a phone, otherwise, how could a drunk call his wife and tell her he was going to be late coming home? I picked a bar, whose airlock was painted to look like a brick tunnel, and walked in.

The airlock irised shut behind me and I blinked in the gloom. My nose was assaulted with sickly sweet incense, and stale liquor, and cigar smoke.

The place was tiny, and crowded with dented metal tables and chairs that were bolted to the floorplates. A woman stood behind the bar, looking hard and brassy and cheap, watching a soap opera on her vid. A spacer sat in one corner, staring at his bulb of beer.

The bartender looked up. "Get lost, kid," she said. "No minors

allowed."

"Sorry, ma'am," I said. "I just wanted to use your telephone. I was packjacked, and I need to call the police."

The bartender turned back to her soap opera. "Go peddle it somewhere else, sonny. The phone's for customers only."

"Please," I said. "My father's an ambassador, from 1898? I don't have any money, and I'm stuck here. I won't be a minute."

The spacer looked up from his drink. "Get lost, the lady said," he slurred at me.

"I'll buy something," I said.

"You just said you don't have any money," the bartender said.

"I'll pay for it when the police get here. The Embassy will cover it."

"No credit," she said.

"You're not going to let me use your phone?" I said.

"That's right," she said, still staring at her vid.

"I'm a stranger, an ambassador's son, who's been robbed. A kid. Stuck here, broke and alone, and you won't let me use your phone to call the police?"

"That's about the size of things," she said.

"Well, I guess my Pa was right. The whole world went to hell after 1914. No manners, no human decency."

"You're breaking my heart," she said.

"Fine. Be that way. Send me back out on the street, deny me a favour that won't cost you one red cent, just because I'm a stranger."

"Shut up, kid, for chrissakes," the spacer said. "I'll stand him to a Coke, if that's what it takes. Just let him use the phone and get out of here. He's giving me a headache."

"Thank you, sir," I said, politely.

The bartender switched her vid over to phone mode, poured me a Coke, and handed me the vid.

The policeman who showed up a few minutes later stuck me in the back of his cruiser, listened to my story, scanned my retinas, confirmed my identity, and retracted the armour between the back and front seats.

"I'll take you to the station house," he said. "We'll contact your Embassy, let them handle it from there."

"What about the kids who 'jacked me?" I asked.

The cop turned the jetcar's conn over to wire-fly mode and turned

around. "You got any description?"

"Well, they had really nice packs on, with the traffic beacons snapped off. One was red, and I think the other was green. And they were young. Ten or eleven."

The cop punched at his screen. "Kid," he said, "I got over three million minors eight to eleven, flying packs less than a year old. The most popular colour is red. Second choice, green. Where would you like me to start? Alphabetically?"

"Sorry, sir, I didn't realise."

"Sure," he said. "Whatever."

"I guess I'm not thinking very clearly. It's been a long day."

The cop looked over to me and smiled. "I guess it has, at that. Don't worry, kid, we'll get you home all right."

They gave me a fresh jumpsuit, sat me on a bench, called the embassy, and forgot about me. A long, boring time later, a fat man with walrus moustaches and ruddy skin showed up.

"On your feet, lad," he said. "I'm Pondicherry, your father's successor. You've made quite a mess of things, haven't you?" He had a clipped, British accent, with a hint of something else. I remembered Mr Johnstone saying he'd been in India. He wore a standard unisex jumpsuit, with his ambassadorial sash overtop of it. He looked ridiculous.

"Sorry to have disturbed you, sir," I said.

"I'm sure you are," he said. "Come along, we'll see about fixing this mess."

He used the station's teleporter to bring me to his apartment. It was as ridiculous as his uniform, and in the same way. He'd taken the basic elegant simplicity of a standard 1975 unit and draped all kinds of silly trophies and models overtop of it: lions' heads and sabers and model ships and framed medals and savage masks and dolls.

"You may look, but not touch, do you understand me?" he said, as we stepped out of the teleporter.

"Yes, sir," I said. If anyone else had said it, I would have been offended, but coming from this puffed-up pigeon, it didn't sting much.

He went to a vid and punched impatiently at the screen while I prowled the apartment. The bookcase was full of old friends, books by the Frenchman, of course, and more, with strange names like

Wells and Burroughs and Shelley. I looked over a long, stone-headed spear, and the curve of an elephant's tusk, and a collection of campaign ribbons and medals under glass. I returned to the bookcase: something had been bothering me. There, there it was: "War of the Worlds," the book that Mr Adelson had given me for Christmas. But there was something wrong with the spine of this one: instead of Jules Verne, the author name was _H.G. Wells_. I snuck a look over my shoulder; Pondicherry was still stabbing at the screen. I snuck the book off the shelf and turned to the title page: "War of the Worlds, by Herbert George Wells." I turned to the first chapter:

The Eve of the War

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.

It was just as I remembered it, every word, just as it was in the Verne. I couldn't begin to explain it.

A robutler swung out of its niche with a sheaf of papers. I startled at the noise, then reflexively stuck the book in my jumpsuit. The roboutler delivered them to Pondicherry, who stuffed them in a briefcase.

"The embassy will be able to return you home by courier route in three hours. Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of waiting around here until then. I have an important meeting to attend — you'll have to come along."

"Yes, sir," I said, trying to sound eager and helpful.

"Don't say anything, don't touch anything. This is very sensitive."

"No, sir, I won't. Thank you, sir."

The meeting was in a private room in a fancy restaurant, one that I'd been to before for an embassy Christmas party. Mama had drunk two glasses of sherry, and had flushed right to the neck of her dress. We'd had roast beef, and a goose wrapped inside a huge squash, the size of a barrel, like they grew on the Moon.

Pondicherry whisked through the lobby, and the main dining room, and then up a narrow set of stairs, without checking to see if

I was following. I dawdled a little, remembering Pa laughing and raising his glass in toast after toast.

I caught up with Pondicherry just as he was ordering, speaking brusquely into the table. Another man sat opposite him. Pondicherry looked up at me and said, "Have you dined, boy?"

"No, sir."

He ordered me a plate of calf livers in cream sauce, which is about the worst thing you can feed a boy, if you ask me, which he didn't. "Sit down," he said. "Mr Nussbaum, Master James Nicholson. I am temporarily in loco parentis, until he can be sent home."

Nussbaum smiled and extended his hand. He was wearing a grey suit, with a strange cut, and a black tie. His fingers dripped with heavy gold rings, and his hair, while short, still managed to look fancy and a little sissy-fied. "Good to meetcha, son. You Lester's boy?"

"Yes, sir, he was my Pa."

"Good man. A damned shame. What are you doing here? Playing hooky?"

"I guess I just got lost. I'm going home, soon as they can get me there."

"Is that so? Well, I'll be sad to see you go. You look like a smart kid. You like chocolate cake, I bet."

"Sometimes," I said.

"Like when?"

"When my mama makes it, with a glass of milk, after school," I said.

He laughed, a strangled har-har-har. "You guys kill me. Your mama, huh? Well, they make some fine chocolate cake here, though it may not be as good as the stuff from home." He thumbed the table. "Sweetie, send up the biggest piece of chocolate cake you got down there, and a glass a milk, willya?"

The table acknowledged his request with a soft green light.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

"That's quite enough, I think," Pondicherry said. "I didn't come here to watch you rot young James's teeth. Can we get to business?"

Pondicherry started talking, in rapid, clipped sentences, punctuated by vicious bites of his food. I tried to follow what it was about — trading buffalo steaks for rare metals, I got that much, but not much more. The calves' livers were worse than I imagined, and I hid as much of them as I could under the potatoes, then pushed the

plate away and dug into the cake.

I sneaked a look up and saw that Nussbaum was grinning slyly at me. He hadn't said much, just ate calmly and waited for Pondicherry to run out of steam. He caught my eye and slipped a wink at me. I looked over at Pondicherry, who was noisily cudding a piece of steak, oblivious, and winked back at Nussbaum.

Pondicherry daubbed at his mouth with his napkin. "Excuse me," he said, "I'll be right back." He stood and walked towards the WC.

Nussbaum suddenly jingled. Distractledly, he patted his pockets until he located a tiny phone. He flipped it open and grunted "Nussbaum," into it.

"Jules!" he said a moment later. "How're things?"

He scowled as he listened to the answer. "Now, you and I know that there's a difference between smart and greedy. I think it's a bad idea."

He listened some more and drummed his fingers on the table.

"Because it's not credible, dammit! Even the title is anachronistic: no one in 1902 is going to understand what Neuromancer means. Think about it, wouldya? Why don't you do some of Twain's stuff? Those books've got legs."

My jaw dropped. Nussbaum was talking to the Frenchman — and he was helping him to cheat! To steal from Mark Twain! I was suddenly conscious of "War of the Worlds," down the front of my jumpsuit. I thought back to Mr Adelson's assignment, and it all made sudden sense. Verne was a plagiarist.

Nussbaum hung up just as Pondicherry re-seated himself. He took a sip of his drink, then held up a hand. Pondicherry eyed him coldly.

"Look," Nussbaum said. "We've gone over this a few times, OK? I know where you stand. You know where I stand. We're not standing in the same place. Much as I enjoy your company, I don't really wanna spend the whole day listening to you repeating yourself. All right?"

"Really, I don't think —" Pondicherry started, but Nussbaum held up his hand again.

"That's all right, I'm a rude son-of-a-bitch, and I know it. Let's just take it as read that you and me spent the whole afternoon letting the other fella know how sincere our positions are. Then we can move onto cocktails, and compromise, and maybe have some of the day left over." Pondicherry started to talk again, but Nussbaum

plowed over him. "I'll go to six troy ounces per steer. You won't get a better offer. 98% pure ores. Better than anything you'd ever refine back home. It's as far as I go."

"Sir, is that an ultimatum?" Pondicherry asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Call it whatever you please, buster. It's my final, iron-clad offer. You don't like it, I can talk to the Chinaman. He seemed pretty eager to get some good metal home to the Emperor."

"You wouldn't — he's too far back, it would violate the protocols."

"That's what you say. It may be what the trade court decides. I'll take my chances."

"Six and a half ounces," Pondicherry said, in a spoiled-brat voice.

"You don't hear so good, do you? Six ounces is the offer on the table; take it or leave it." Nussbaum pushed some papers across the table.

Pondicherry stared at them for a long moment. "I will sign them, sir, but it is with the expectation of continued trade opportunities. This is a good-will gesture, do you understand?"

Nussbaum snorted and reached for his papers. "This is about steaks and metals. This isn't about the future, it's about today, now. That's what's on the table. You can sign it, or you can walk away."

Pondicherry blew air out his nose like a crazy horse, and signed. "If you'll excuse me, I need to use the WC again." He rose and left the room, purple from the collar up.

"What a maroon," Nussbaum said to the closed door. "This's gotta be a real blast for you, huh?" he said.

I grinned. "It's not so bad. I liked watchin' you hogtie him."

He laughed. "I never would've tried that on your father, kid. He was too sharp. But fatso there, he's terrified the Chinaman will give the Middle Kingdom an edge when it faces down his Royal Navy. All it takes is the slightest hint, and he folds like a cheap suit."

That made me chuckle — a cheap suit!

I gave him my best innocent look. "Who else knows about the Frenchman?" I asked him.

Nussbaum grinned like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I realised about halfway through that conversation that being Lester's boy, you've probably read just about every word old Jules 'wrote.'"

"I have," I said. I took out "War of the Worlds." "How does Mr Wells feel about this?" I asked.

"I imagine he's pretty mystified," Nussbaum said. "Would you believe, you're the first one who's caught on?"

I believed it. I knew enough to know that the agencies that policed the protocols had their hands full keeping track of art and gold smugglers. I'd never even thought of smuggling words. If the trade courts found out… Well, hardly a week went by that someone didn't propose shutting down the ambassadorships; they'd talk about how the future kept on leaking pastwards, and if we thought 1975 looked bad, imagine life in 1492 once the future reached it! The ambassadors had made a lot of friends in high places, though: they used their influence to keep things on an even keel.

Nussbaum raised an eyebrow and studied me. "I think your father may've figured it out, but he kept it to himself. He and Jules got along like a house on fire."

I kept the innocent look on my face. "Well, then," I said. "If Pa didn't say anything, you'd think that I wouldn't either, right?"

Nussbaum sighed and gave me a sheepish look. "I'd like to think so," he said.

I turned the book over in my hands, keeping my gaze locked with his. I was about to tell him that I'd keep it to myself, but at the last minute, some instinct told me to keep my mouth shut.

Nussbaum shrugged as though to say, I give up. "Hey, you're headed home today, right?" he said, carefully.

"Yes, sir."

"I've got a message that you could maybe relay for me, you think?"

"I guess so… " I said, doubtfully.

"I'll make it worth your while. It's got to go to a friend of mine in Frisco. There's no hurry — just make sure he gets it in the next ten years or so. Once you deliver it, he'll take care of you — you'll be set for life."

"Gosh," I said, deadpan.

"Are you game?"

"I guess so. Sure." My heart skipped. Set for life!

"The man you want to speak to is Reddekop, he's the organist at the Castro theatre. Tell him: 'Nussbaum says get out by October 29th, 1929.' He'll know what it means. You got that?"

"Reddekop, Castro Theatre. October 29th, 1929."

"Exac-atac-ally." He slid "War of the Worlds" into his briefcase. "You're doin' me a hell of a favour, son."

He shook my hand. Pondicherry came back in then, and glared at me. "The embassy contacted me. They can set you at home six months after you left — there's a courier gateway this afternoon."

"Six months!" I said. "My Mama will go crazy! Can't you get me home any sooner?"

Pondicherry smirked. "Don't complain to me, boy. You dug this hole yourself. The next scheduled courier going anywhere near your departure-point is in five years. We'll send notice to your mother then, to expect you home mid-July."

"Tough break, kiddo," Nussbaum said, and he shook my hand and slipped me another wink.

The courier gateway let me out in an alleyway in Salt Lake City. The embassy had given me ten Wells Fargo dollars, and fitted me out with a pair of jeans and a workshirt that were both far too big for me, so that they slopped around me as I made my way to the train station and bought my ticket to New Jerusalem.

It was Wednesday, the normal schedule for the Zephyr Speedball, so I didn't have too long to wait at the station. I bought copies of the Salt Lake City Shout, and the San Francisco Chronicle from a passing newsie. The Chronicle was a week old, but it was filled with all sorts of fascinating big-city gossip. I read it cover-to-cover on the long ride to New Jerusalem.

Mama met me at the train station. I'd been expecting a switching, right then and there, but instead she hugged me fiercely with tears in her eyes. I remembered that it had been over six months for her since I'd gone.

"James, you will be the death of me, I swear," she said, after she'd squeezed every last bit of stuffing out of me.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I said.

"We had to tell everyone you'd gone away to school in France," a familiar male voice said. I looked up and saw Mr Johnstone standing a few yards away, with our team and trap. He was glaring at me. "I've had the barn gateway sealed permanently on both sides."

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. But inside, I wasn't. Even though I'd only been away for a few days, I'd had the adventure of a lifetime: smoked and drank and been 'jacked and escaped and received a secret message. My Mama seemed shorter to me, and frailer, and James H Johnstone was a puffed-up nothing of a poltroon.

"We'll put it behind us, son," he said. "But from now on, there will be order in our household, do we understand each-other?"

Our house? I looked up sharply at my Mama. She smiled at me, nervously. "We married, James. A month ago. Congratulate me!"

I thought about it. My Mama needed someone around to take care of her, and vice-versa. After all, it wasn't right for her to be all alone. With a start, I realised that in my mind, I'd left my Mama's house. I felt the Wells-Fargo notes in my pocket.

"Congratulations, Mama. Congratulations, Mr Johnstone."

Mama hugged me again and the Mr Johnstone drove us home in the trap.

All through the rest of the day, Mama kept looking worriedly at me, whenever she thought I wasn't watching. I pretended not to notice, and did my chores, then took my Chronicle out to the apple orchard behind the Academy. I sat beneath a big, shady tree and re-read the paper, all the curious bits and pieces of a city frozen in time.

I was hardly surprised to see Mr Adelson, nor did he seem surprised to see me.

"Back from France, James?"

"Yes, sir."

"Looks like it did you some good, though I must say, we missed you around the Academy. It just wasn't the same. Have you been keeping up your writing?"

"Sorry, sir, I haven't. There hasn't been time. I'm thinking about writing an adventure story, though — about pirates and space-travellers and airships," I said.

"That sound exciting." He sat down beside me, and we sat there in silence for a time, watching the flies buzz around. The air was sweet with apple blossoms, and the only sound was the wind in the trees.

"I'm going to miss this place," I said, unthinking.

"Me, too," Mr Adelson said.

Our eyes locked, and a slow smile spread over his face. "Well, I know where _I'm_ going, but where are you off to, son?"

"You're going away?" I said.

"Yes, sir. Is that a copy of the _Chronicle_? Give it here, I'll show you something."

He flipped through the pages, and pointed to an advertisement.

"The Slippery Trick is in port, and they're signing on crew for a run through the south seas, in September. I intend to go as Quartermaster."

"You're leaving?" I said, shocked to my boots.

To my surprise, he pulled out a pouch of tobacco and some rolling papers and rolled himself a cigarette. I'd never seen a schoolteacher smoking before. He took a thoughtful puff and blew the smoke out into the sky. "To tell you the truth, James, I just don't think I'm cut out for this line of work. Not enough excitement in a town like this. I've never been happier than I was when I was at sea, and that's as good a reason to go back as any. I'll miss you, though, son. You were a delight to teach."

"But what will I do?" I said.

"Why, I expect your mother will send you back East to go to school. I graduated you from the Academy in absentia during the last week of classes. Your report card and diploma are waiting on my desk."

"Graduated?" I said, shocked. I had another year to go at the Academy.

"Don't look so surprised! There was no earthly reason for you to stay at the Academy. I'd say you were ready for college, myself. Maybe Harvard!" He tousled my hair.

I allowed myself a smile — I didn't think I was any smarter than the other kids, but I sure knew a whole lot more about the world — the worlds! And maybe, in my heart of hearts, I knew that I was a little smarter. "I'll miss you, sir," I said.

"Call me Robert. School's out. Where are you off to, James?"

I gestured with my copy of the Chronicle.

"My home town! Whatever for?"

I looked at my shoes.

"Oh, a secret. I see. Well, I won't pry. Does your mother know about this?"

I felt like kicking myself. If I said no, he'd have to tell her. If I said yes, I'd only have myself to blame if he spilled the news to her. I looked at him, and he blew a streamer of smoke into the sky. "No, sir," I said. "No, Robert."

He looked at me. He winked. "Better keep it to ourselves, then," he said.

The ticket-girl at the Castro Theatre wasn't any older than I was,

but she wore her hair shorter than some of the boys I'd known back home, and more makeup than even the painted ladies at the saloon. She looked at me like I was some kind of small-town fool. It was a look I was getting used to seeing.

"Reddekop only plays for the evening shows, kid. No organ for the matinee."

"Who you calling a kid?" I said. I'd kept a civil tongue ever since debarking the train, treating adult and kid with equal respect, but I was getting sick of being treated like a yokel. I'd been farther than any of these dusty slickers would ever go, and I was grown enough that I'd told my Mama and Mr Johnstone that I was going off on my own, instead of just leaving a note like I'd originally planned.

"You. Kid. You want to talk to Reddekop, you come back after six. In the meantime, you can either buy a ticket to the matinee or get lost."

On reflection, telling my Mama was probably a mistake. It meant that I was locked in my room for two consecutive Wednesdays so that I couldn't catch the train. On the third Wednesday, I climbed out onto the roof and then went down the rope-ladder I'd hidden behind a chimney. The Wells Fargo notes I'd started with were almost gone, mostly spent on the expensive food on the train — I hadn't dared try to sneak any food away from home, my Mama was no fool.

I thought about buying a ticket to the matinee. I still had almost five dollars, but a quick look at the menus in the restaurants had taught me that if I thought the food on the train was expensive, I had another think coming. I shouldered my rucksack and wandered away, taking care to avoid the filth from dogs and people that littered the sidewalks. I told myself that I wasn't homesick — just tired.

"October 29, 1929, huh?" Reddekop was a small German with a greying spade beard and a heavily oiled part in his long hair. His fingers were long and nimble, but nearly everything else about him was short and crude. He made me nervous.

"Yes, sir. Mr Nussbaum thought you'd know what it meant."

Reddekop struck a match off the side of the organist's pit, lighted a pipe, then tossed the match carelessly into the theatre seats. I winced and he chuckled. "Not to worry, kid. The place won't burn down for a few years yet. I have it on the very best authority.

"Now, Nussbaum says October 29, 1929. What else does he say?"

"He said that you'd take care of me."

He gripped the pipe in his yellow teeth and hissed a laugh around the stem. "He did, did he? Well, I suppose I should. Of course, I won't know for sure for more than 25 years — I don't suppose you want to wait that long?"

"No, sir!" I said. I didn't like this little man — he reminded me of some kind of musical rat.

"I thought not. Do you know what a trust is, James?"

We'd covered that in common law — I could rattle off about thirty different kinds without blinking. "I have a general idea," I said.

"Good, good. What I'm thinking is, the best thing is for me to set up a trust through a lawyer I know on Market Street. He'll make sure that you're always flush, but never so filthy that someone will take a notice in you. How does that strike you?"

I thought it over. "How do I know that the trust fund won't disappear in a few years?"

"You're nobody's fool, huh? Well, how about this — you find your own advocate: a lawyer, a bondsman, someone you trust, and he can look over all the books and papers, make sure it's all square-john. How does that strike you?"

Reddekop knew I was a stranger in town, and maybe he was counting on my not being able to find anyone qualified to audit the trust, but I had an ace up my sleeve. I wasn't anybody's fool.

"That sounds fair," I said.

Back at my Mama's I'd had long hard days, doing chores: chopping wood, stacking hay, weeding the garden, carrying water. I'd go to bed bone-tired, limp as a rag and as exhausted as I thought I could be.

Boy, was I wrong! By the time I found Mr Adelson's rooming house, I could barely stand, my mouth was dry as a salt-flat, and it was hard to keep my eyes open. They've got hills in San Francisco that must've been some kind of joke God played. His landlady, a worn-out grey woman whose sour expression seemed directed at everything and anything, let me in and pointed me up three rickety flights of stairs to Mr Adelson's room.

I dragged my luggage up with me, bumping it on the stairs, and rapped on the door. Mr Adelson answered in the same shirtsleeves

and suspenders I'd seen him in that Christmas, an age ago, when my Mama dragged me to his cottage. "James!" he said.

"Mr Adelson," I said. "Sorry to drop in like this."

He took my bag from me and ushered me into his room, pulling up a chair. "What on earth are you doing here?" he said. "Do your parents know where you are? Are you all right? Have you eaten? Are you hungry?"

"I'm pretty hungry — I haven't eaten since supper last night on the train," I tried to make it sound jaunty, but I'm afraid it came out pretty tired-sounding."

"I'll fix us sandwiches," he said, and started fishing around his sea-chest. I watched his shoulders move for a moment, and then my eyes closed.

"Well, good morning," Mr Adelson said, as I sat bolt upright, disoriented in a strange bed with a strange blanket. "Coffee?"

He was leaning over a little Sterno stove, heating up a small tin pot. Morning sun streamed in through the grimy window.

"I wrapped your sandwich up from last night. It's there, on the dresser."

I stood up and saw that except for my shoes, I was still dressed. The sandwich was salt beef and cheese, and the sourdough was stale, and it was the best thing I'd ever eaten. Mr Adelson handed me a tin cup full of strong coffee, and though I don't much like coffee, I found myself drinking it as fast as I could.

"Thank you, Mr Adelson," I said.

"Robert," he said, and sat down on the room's only chair. I perched on the bed's end. "Well, you seem to have had quite a day! Let's hear about it."

I told him as much as I could, fudging around some of the details — my Mama surely did know where I was, even if she wasn't very happy about it; and of course, I couldn't tell him that I'd met Nussbaum in 1975, so I just moved the locale to France, and caged around what message he'd asked me to deliver to Reddekop. It still made for a pretty exciting telling.

"So you want me to go to this lawyer's office with you? To look over the papers? James, I'm just a sailor, I'm not qualified."

I'd prepared for this argument, on the long slog to the rooming house. "But I know something about this; they won't believe it, though, and will slip all kinds of dirty tricks in if they think that the

only fellow who'll be looking at it is just a kid."

"Explain to me again why you don't want to wire Mr Johnstone to come and look it over? It sounds like an awful lot of money for him not to be involved."

"He's not my Pa, Robert. I don't even like him, and chances are, he'll hide away all that money until I'm eighteen or _twenty-one_, and try to send me off to school."

"And what's wrong with that? You have other plans?"

"Sure," I said, too loudly — I hadn't really worked that part out. I just knew that the next time I set foot in New Jerusalem, I'd be my own man, a man of the world, and not dependent on anyone. I'd take Mama and Mr Johnstone out for a big supper, and stay in the fanciest room at the Stableman's hotel, and hire Tommy Benson to carry my bags to my room. "Besides, I'm not asking you to do this for free. I'll pay you a — an administrative fee. Five percent, for life!"

He looked serious. "James, if I do this — mind I said if — I won't take a red cent. There are things here that you're not telling me. Now, that's your business, but I want to make sure that if anyone ever scrutinises the affair, that it's clear that I didn't receive any benefit from it."

I smiled. I knew I had him — if he'd thought it that far through, he wasn't going to say no. Besides, I hadn't even played my trump card yet: that if he didn't help me, I'd be out on the streets on my own, and I could tell that he didn't like that idea.

Mr Adelson wore his teacher clothes for the affair and I wore the good breeches and shirt I'd packed. We stopped at a barber's before, Mr Adelson treated me to a haircut from the number-two man while he took a shave and a trim. We boarded the cablecar to Market like a couple of proper gentlemen, and if I thought flying in a jetpack was exciting, it was nothing compared to the terror of hanging on the running-board of a cablecar as it laboured up and then — quickly! — down a monster hill.

The lawyer was a foreigner, a Frenchie or a Belgian, and his offices were grubby and filled with stinking cigar smoke and the din of the trolleys. He asked no embarrassing questions of me. He just sized up Mr Adelson, then put away the papers on his desk and presented a set from his briefcase, laying out the terms of the trust, and retreated from the office. I read over Mr Adelson's shoulder, the

terms scribbled in a hasty hand, but every word of it legal and binding, near as I could tell.

The amounts in question were staggering. Two hundred dollars, every month! Indexed for inflation, for seventy years or the duration of my natural life, whichever was lesser. The records of the trust to be deposited with the Wells Fargo, subject to scrutiny on demand. Mr Adelson looked long and hard at me. "James, I can't begin to imagine what sort of information you've traded for this, but son, you're rich as Croesus!"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Do these papers look legal to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"They seem legal to me, too."

A bubble of excitement filled my chest and I had to restrain myself from bouncing on my heels. "I'm going to sign it," I said. "Will you witness it?"

"I've got a better idea. Let's get that lawyer and take this down to the Wells Fargo and have the President of the Bank witness it himself."

And that's just what we did.

Mr Adelson had spent the previous night on the floor, while I slept in his bed. My first month's payment was tucked carefully in my pocket, and over his protests, I pried loose a few bills and took my own room in the rooming house, and then the two of us ate out at a restaurant whose prices had seemed impossibly out-of-reach the day before. We had oysters and steaks and I had a slab of apple pie for desert with fresh ice cream and peach syrup, and when I was done, I felt like new man. Mr Adelson had a bottle of beer with dinner, and a whiskey afterwards, and I insisted on paying.

"Well, then," he said, sipping his whiskey. "You're a very well-set-up young man. What will you do now?"

All throughout my scheming since my second return from 75, the prospect of what to do with all the money had niggled away at the back of my mind. All I knew for sure was that I didn't want to grow up in New Jerusalem. I wanted adventure, exotic places and people, danger and excitement. Over dinner, though, a plan had been forming in my head.

"Does the Slippery Trick need a cabin-boy?"

He shook his head and smiled at me. "I was afraid it was

something like that. Son, you could pay for a stateroom on a proper liner with all the money you have. Why would you want to be in charge of chamber-pots on a leaky old tub?"

"Why do you want to sail off on a leaky old tub instead of teaching in Utah, or working on the trolleys here?"

It took me most of the night to convince him, but there was no doubt in my mind that I would, and when the ship sailed, that I'd be on it, with a big, leather-bound log, writing stories.

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